

Feb 22, 2014 (February letter)

Dear Samantha,

It certainly sounds like you had a wonderful time on your winter camping trip. I enjoyed having the photos on your Facebook page to supplement the story you told as well. I appreciated being able to see the snow wall you built for your tent, for example, and it was lovely to see all the smiling faces of your friends – including those who went snow-diving.

Your story reminded me of two winter group excursions that I took when I was a graduate student at UBC. One was with a group of students and our professor and the other was with a few graduate student friends and Fran. They were lovely experiences, but in both cases I ended up nursing one of the participants down the hill while the others went on ahead.

The trip with our professor was up to a cabin near Black Tusk mountain north of Vancouver in 1971. Things were very rustic in those days, so much of the uphill climbing was done with sealskin strips attached to the bottom of our cross-country skis. The fine hairs on sealskin are all slanting in the same direction, so if you put the skins on your skis so the hairs are pointing backward, it will slide nicely when you are going downhill, but the hairs will catch the snow in the other direction and the skis will stick.

Just like your trip, we had a couple of hours of hiking (all uphill) to get to the cabin. It was a slow trek, but the weather was nice and we had a comfortable destination as we slogged our way up the hill. I have included a photo of the cabin to give you an idea how much snow there was. We had to dig our way into the cabin when we arrived, but it was well stocked with wood and didn't take long to get ourselves toasty and warm.



There were about four students on the trip – along with the professor and his teenage son. The three other students were experienced skiers and mountain trekkers. I had some experience, but I wouldn't call myself an expert by any means. The professor had done a lot of trekking as well, but his son was a novice – and a bit of a whiner at the same time. He was not in great shape so we had to put up with his complaining all the way up the hill. It was fortunate that the day was so beautiful so we didn't mind the frequent stops as we waited for him to catch his breath.

Once we got up to the cabin we found ourselves in a beautiful mountain region – just perfect for exploration and the occasional downhill ski. I have included a photo of the valley in which the cabin was located to give you an idea of the spectacular region. As you can see, the sky was clear and the sun was warm. We spent a wonderful day breaking trails in the fresh snow and practicing our Telemark turns with the powder snow up to our knees. One of the students with us had been a ski instructor in Banff so his skills were well used that day.

We woke up the morning of our departure to find that the blue skies were now grey and the occasional flakes of snow threatened a rather nasty snowfall. We packed up quickly and started off as the wind came up and the snow came down. In spite of the weather we were looking forward to the return trip since it was all downhill and would be a nice reward for the hard work we had getting up to the cabin.

The expert skiers took off ahead and soon disappeared in the swirling snow. Even the mediocre ones were swallowed up by the white. I hung back waiting for the professor's son to get his gear together and slowly make his way tentatively out to the trail. It looked like I was designated as the "sweep" to make sure that everyone made it back okay. I thought that if I let the slowpoke get far enough ahead of me, I could get in my own free skiing as I caught up with him.



Just as he was about to disappear into the whirling snow, I saw him fall. When I got up to him he was still in a heap – complaining about his skis, the weather, the cold, and anything else nearby. He was clearly on the edge of a meltdown even though we had only begun the trip.

I helped him up, brushed him off, gathered his skis, and tried to snap them into place. Unfortunately, he had broken one of the clips, so there was no way that we could securely attach the boot to the ski. If he was to proceed, he would have to slide the ski without picking it up. It was not clear if he would be up to this – especially on top of his resistance to the trip all the way from its beginning. I could see that my plan to get in some nice free skiing on the way down the mountain was not going to happen.

For the next hour or so, my time was spent picking him up, brushing him off, getting his boot into the clip as best we could, trying to calm him amid the tears of frustration, and pointing him in the right direction for another slide and fall. It didn't help that much of the trail was narrow so the only way for him to slow down was by falling. He wasn't even able to do the snowplow since his boot clip did not allow any twisting of the clamp without falling off.

Slide, down, up, brush, encourage, slide, down, up, brush, encourage – we proceeded down the hill and into the blizzard. We were fortunate that part of the trail was through tall stands of trees that cut the wind and let us see enough to confirm that we were still following the tracks of those ahead. The periods of 'slide' were getting shorter and the periods of 'encourage' were getting longer.

I had long ago given up the prospect of a nice ski down the hill by the time we saw the others through the snowfall. They were hanging around the car with their skis stacked by the trunk and their hands full of sandwiches and chocolate bars that we had left for our return. "What took you so long?" was all I remember hearing as we came limping in to the group! I made a mental note to myself – never go skiing with the boss' son... and always take an extra skiboot clip.

My second memorable experience was with Fran – sometime after this one, I think. It was a similar trek, but this time it was a day trip up the back side of Hollyburn mountain – also north of Vancouver. As with the previous trip, we had to do some climbing to get up to the best area for cross-country skiing, so we took along our sealskins.

Fran was with us this time – and no teenage son – so I felt this was going to be a nice alternative to the disaster of the previous trek. It was Fran's first time on cross-country skis, however, so I expected that we might be going a bit slower than the others.

The trip up was slow, hard work, but significantly lightened by the thought of getting up over the ridge to the rolling hills behind. Fran was doing quite well as she slogged up with us on the skins and gradually became accustomed to the pace and balance of cross-country trekking. We arrived over the ridge later than the rest of the gang and although I was ready for some nice skiing, I realized that Fran was quite exhausted from the climb. By the time we finished our snack and I had tried out a few of the trails, the others were already talking about heading back. Fran and I decided that we would start a bit ahead of them since our return was most likely to be slower.

As we headed down I caught a glimpse of the trial that was to come. Fran pointed her skis downhill but as soon as she picked up speed, she realized that she couldn't stop like one did on downhill skis. On cross-country skis the boots are only attached at the toe, so if one tries to point the skis into a snowplow, the heel slides off and the toe gets twisted. For a novice, the alternative of a wide slow turn was also out since the trail was narrow and steep. The only way to stop is to fall.

But even falling was a challenge. The first time Fran tried to do it, she sat back on her skis – but all that meant was that she picked up speed. It was like being on a toboggan to which your feet were attached with no way of getting leverage to tip over. Her first stop was more like a tumble than a fall – and one that filled her jacket, glasses, hat, and gloves with snow.

By the time I reached her she was a heap of snow, tired, cranky, and cold. Once again I found myself going through the routine of helping her up, brushing her off, checking her equipment (luckily she hadn't broken her clip), and encouraging her. Only this time, any advice I gave her was rejected out of hand! All I could do was watch her head off once again and hope for the best.

Each time one of our friends passed us they would shout out a word of advice: “fall sideways”, “drag your poles together”, or “crouch down with your poles between your legs” – as they slalomed past us down the trail. None of the suggestions took into account Fran's fatigue, however, so each time she would follow their advice the result was the same: snow where it shouldn't be, skis askew, and more tears.

By the time we were about half way to the car, the skis came off. Fran felt that it was better to slog through the snow and ice than to try and control herself on skis. At least it meant she had a bit more control even if it was about as exhausting. I hung back not saying a word – having learned early on that my comments were not appreciated.

Just as we got to the final section of the trail we could see the car in the distance and a rather gentle slope leading to it. Fran decided it was safe to try the skis again, so she wiped her tears, clipped up her skis, and pointed them to the car. By the time I caught up to her she was chatting with the others, smiling like she has spent a lovely day on the hill, and already making plans to take another trip. Go figure!!!

Little did I know how this was a dry run for the day our daughter would have her first experience with downhill skis (see [Letter2Samantha20130224DaeganLearningToSki01.pdf](#)).

Love,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill". The letters are cursive and somewhat slanted to the right.